Mesopotamia ܡܫܘܬ ܒܝܬ ܢܗܪ

Issue 4 **August 2007**

Religious and Ethnic Persecution Continues in Iraq : Facts reported to U.S. Commission

If the targeted persecution and deadly violence against Christians continue in Iraq, it may be the end of the presence of this ancient people who have inhabited that land for more than 6,000 years. That is the message the Chaldean Assyrian Syriac Council of America (CASCA) is voicing throughout the country and topic of discussion at the first of two hearings with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

As the bloodshed continues, witnesses gave dramatic first-hand accounts of life and deteriorating conditions for the Christian Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac people in war-torn Iraq during the hearing on July 25.
"Together with the rising tide of sectarian violence, conditions for religious minorities and the associated Iraqi crisis require heightened attention and more effective action by the U.S. government," said Michael Cromartie, chair of the USCIRF "That is why we are having this hearing."
Since the start of the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the population of Iraqi Christians has been drastically dwindling. More than 700,000 of the 1.2 million are either internally displaced seeking shelter in Kurdish Regional Province and Nineveh Plain cities or stranded in neighboring countries seeking asylum.

Congresswoman Anna Eshoo (D-CA) first-generation American of Assyrian and Armenian descent believes that there are significant factors that have contributed to the current crisis. Iraq's religious minority populations do not receive adequate development assistance. "Because they represent such a small community, their voice in national politics is relatively weak," said Eshoo.

Christians in Iraq are not armed. They are not protected by any militia, so they are easy targets and clearly unwanted in Iraq by the Muslim extremist.
Churches are being bombed, priests kidnapped and killed. Many Christians are being forced to convert to Islam, wear Islamic headscarves, pay burdensome taxes or ransom money to Muslims and forced to leave their homes and businesses with only their clothes on their backs.

ܢܟܝ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܡܝ. ܐܟܐ ܥܡ ܕܝܢ ܕܝܥܕܢ ܕܢܥܕܝܬ ܡܗܝܟܒܢ ܘܢܝܩܗܡܢ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܡܥܒܝܢ ܘܡܥܡܥܬܢ ܐ̈ܒܕܝܢ ܘܝܥܝܟ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܐܝܟ ܥܡ ܕܝܢ ܘܢܝܩܗ ܘܢܝܩܗ ܡܝ ܥܠܡ ܡܢ ܕܡܥܡܥܘ ܕܥܕܢ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܢܕܝܬ ܘܢܝܬ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܥܢܬ ܘܢܝܬ ܡܘܡܥܢ ܕܡܥܒܝ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܡܟܝ ܘܡܥܡܥܢ ܕܡܥܒܝ. ܕܝܥܕܗܝ ܫܘܢ ܘܢܝܬ ܘ

THE TRAGEDY OF IRAQ'S CHRISTIANS (part 2)

Dr. Joseph SEFERTA

Before analysing today's situation, we need to look briefly at an important change that affected the church in Iraq in the 16th century. Due to the theological controvercy and corruption in the patriarchal system, a large section of the church turned to Rome and converted to Catholicism. This group became known as the Chaldean Catholic Church and was given its own patriarch. This Chaldean Church (to which I belong) grew and eventually became the church of the majority of the Christians in Iraq. Our "Nestorian" counterpart later split into two churches, one of which adopted the name "Assyrian" and the other assumed the old title of "The Church of the East". Iraq has other Christian denominations, both Uniate (i.e., Catholic) and Orthodox: Armenians, Syrians, Melkites and Copts, plus some Latin Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants.

Although Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, his regime was secular by nature and similar to the Ba'th regime in Syria today. Hence there was no official discrimination against the Christians, as long as they toed the party line. However, after the American invasion, the Christians' fortune was reversed when they became unjustly identified with the "Christian" invaders. Previously, and in spite of popular prejudices which always existed, they could at least live and worship in peace and life was generally bearable.

Today, however, Iraq's Christians are being targeted and persecuted by Muslim fanatics, with the Americans turning a blind eye and completely ignoring their pleas for help. Unfortunately for the Christians, they are caught up in the middle of a savage civil war between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims vying to gain control of the country.

What particularly compounds the tragedy of Iraqi Christians is the fact that the private armies and gangs of Islamists appear to consider the indigenous Christian population to be their common enemy. Sadly, the Christians are a soft target because they are fewer in number, are not armed and have no clans or tribes to come to their rescue. Hence, hundreds of them are being terrorised, abducted and killed. Christian women and girls are ordered to cover up according to the strict Shari'a laws, or else they are attacked and raped. Priests are ordered to remove crosses and not ring church bells, or else their churches risk being attacked and burnt down.

It was in 2004 that the co-ordinated attacks began with six churches being simultaneously bombed while worshippers were praying inside. Many more churches have since been destroyed and countless kidnappings have taken place, of both adults and children, with huge demands for ransom being made, after which the victims are either killed or released. Priests and lay people alike have been beheaded, crucified or shot dead. They have all died in the tradition of true martyrs for Christ, refusing to give up their faith, bearing no hatred towards their neighbour, harbouring no political ambitions, and simply wanting to live in peace.

Most of the atrocities have taken place in the capital Baghdad, with others happening in Mosul

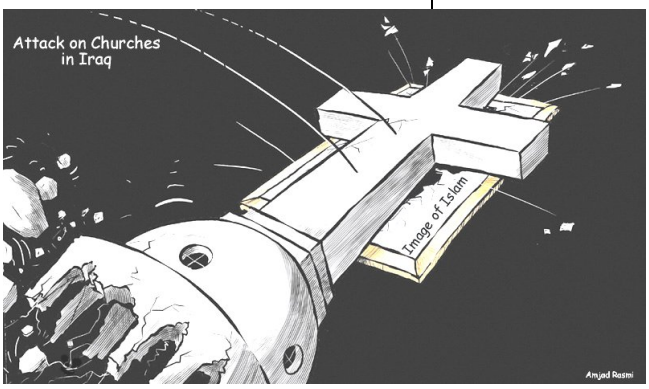
created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

in the north, Basra in the south, and elsewhere. Even the bishops and the Chaldean Patriarch himself have not been spared nasty threats. Among the list of priests who have been martyred, we can name Fr. Munir al-Saqa (shot dead in 2006), Fr. Poulos Iskander (beheaded in 2006) and Fr. Ragheed Ghanny who was shot dead with three deacons in June 2007 in a car, having just finished celebrating mass. Nuns have also been killed as well as numerous lay people.

Fr Poulos Iskandar

Early this year, the Dora district of Baghdad (which was populated by a large number of Christians) was taken over by a gang of Muslim fanatics. They succeeded in kicking out all the Christian families and closing down churches, monasteries, convents and the Chaldean major seminary. Such gangs are now the de facto rulers of lawless Iraq.

Their intention is to turn the country into an Islamist state. Their imams issue "*fatwas*" (religious decrees) against "the Christian infidels" and preach hatred towards Christians and the West every Friday in the mosques. Christians are being given four options to choose from by the fanatics: a) to convert to Islam, b) to leave their homes and never return to them, c) to pay the jizya, or d) to face death.

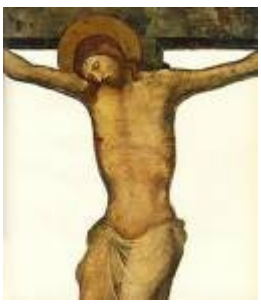


Not surprisingly, tens of thousands of them have fled and are still fleeing, either heading north to the relative safety of Kurdish areas, or leaving the country altogether, living as refugees in Syria, Jordan and elsewhere. So, more than half of the Christian population of Baghdad have now fled, hardly any are left in the south of the country, while those living in the north may still face grave problems in the future.

The United Nations is reportedly monitoring the situation and making estimates about refugees, etc., but without doing anything about it. Christian charities, particularly our own Catholic Aid to the Church in Need, as well as human rights organisations, are doing what they can to help. Prominent religious figures, such as the Pope, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor and the Archbishop of Canterbury, are making their voices heard in protest. However, unless the secular media is mobilised and the most powerful politicians are truly galvanised, the tragedy of Iraq's Christians will get worse, and it may well end up in their complete annihilation, with the rest of the world helplessly looking on.

Prayer: OH LORD

Oh Lord, I do not have tears of warm supplication.
I do not have a heart that suffers while searching for you.
I do not have the repentance and remorse that can bring the children to their inheritance.
My mind has been darkened by the needs of this world and has no strength to raise a look towards You
My heart has become cold as result of bad things and cannot warm up with tears of love.
Oh Christ, the treasure of all good,
Grant me perfect repentance and a wounded heart that seeks your love.
Oh our benevolent creator, have compassion on our misery.
Oh our Father full of mercy, force us to get nearer to You.
Release our souls from the prison that we have blocked ourselves in even if we are not willing.
Oh Lord, may your strength uphold us and rescue us from drowning that we bent over.



Youhanna al-Daliaathi a spiritual leader from Iraq (8th Century)

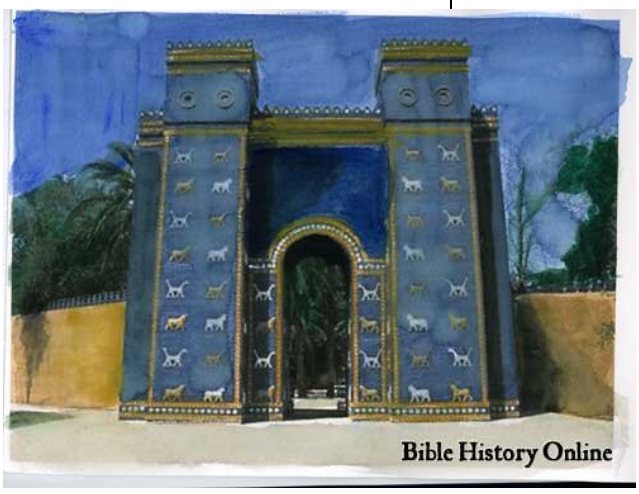
created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Post-Mesopotamian History
(Pre-Christian Era) (4)

By Farid Oufi

By the time of the Exile (of the Jews in Babylonia), many Assyrians and Babylonians had lived in Palestine as administrators, deportees and traders and many Hebrews lived in Mesopotamia, so various forms of cultural contacts continued. In the following centuries, significant strands of Judaism developed in rabbinic academies in Mesopotamia, where pagan practices and traditional academic institutions continued to flourish, sometimes under the patronage of foreign kings, well into the period of Roman imperialism. Signs of influence can be found in many parts of the Bible. The training of scribes is the key to many of the resemblances between Mesopotamia texts and biblical passages[i].

The Jews who established seats of learning in Babylonia during the early centuries of the Christian era were concerned to perform their festivals correctly according to a proper calendar.



To guide them they compiled in the Babylonian Talmud a treatise known as Rosh Hashanah "The Beginning of the Year", in which they recognized four different dates for the New Year. The first day of Tishri, which falls at autumn was regarded by many as the time when the world was created. It is the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, ending ten days of ceremonies for the New Year. The ritual duty of cleansing and purifying the temple takes place on that day. This festival is compared to a Seleuced ritual text about the New Year festival in Babylon, which describes how the shrine of Nabu in Bel's temple was purified on the fifth day with blood.

The Akkadian verb used, *kuppuru*, is cognate with Hebrew kipper, hence, Yom *Kippur*. Cuneiform Akkadian psalms and prayers of praise and of lamentation correspond to the main types of Hebrew psalms. For instance, Psalm 51, which is classified as a penitential or lament psalm, bears especially close resemblances to Akkadian *Su-ila* (hand-raising) prayers. Even the theological ideas expressed in Hebrew and in Akkadian seem to be virtually identical, although the Akkadian texts often refer to more than one deity[ii].

Mesopotamia was a place of constant turmoil. The powers that presided at the birth of its civilization forgot to protect it from its neighbours, whether those of the surrounding mountains or those of the burning Syrian desert, to the west and south[iii].

The land between the two rivers had a history interrupted by many episodes, often dramatic ones. Nomads from uninhabited desert, mountain peoples and hungry travellers across the high plateaux were constantly tempted by the fields, gardens and cities of Mesopotamia. This blessed region, absorbed in its labours, was a fruit that everyone wanted to seize or share[iv].

(To be continued)

created using
BCL easyPDF
Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

The Syrian Orthodox Church

Accessed from Dr Suha Rassam's book (Christianity in Iraq/Chap. 7)

The original centre of the Syrian Orthodox Church is the city of Antioch and its Patriarch carries the title '**Patriarch of Antioch and all the East'**. The current Patriarch is Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, the 121st Patriarch of Antioch for the Syrian Orthodox Church. Born in Mosul, he joined its theological school, St Ephrem, where he trained and later taught. After serving in various positions in Iraq Syria, and obtaining a doctorate in theology from the Episcopal college of theology in New York, he became Patriarch in 1980. Presently he resides in Damascus, and claims around half a million faithful under his leadership through out the world.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has ten Archdioceses (three in Syria, three in Iraq, one in *Tur Abdin*, Holland, Beirut and Sweden) and thirteen Patriarchal vicariates (two in Lebanon, *Zahle & Biqa*'and Mount Lebanon, two in Turkey, Istanbul and Mardine, two in the USA, East USA and West USA and one for each of Jordan & Jerusalem, Germany, Sweden Canada, Australia & New Zealand, Argentine and Brazil). Moreover there are parishes served by a priest who is directly linked with the Patriarch in each of Austria, Belgium, France, Britain, and Switzerland[1].

In Iraq the community is estimated at about 50-70,000 faithful. they live mainly in the cities of Mosul and Baghdad and in some villages in the north of Iraq. They are distributed among three bishoprics, the largest is the bishopric of Baghdad, to be followed by that of Mosul, which also includes the city Kirkuk and some surrounding villages, and the third is bishopric of Der Mar Matta, which include the villages of Bahsheeqa, Bahizzani, Bartella and few other villages.

Churches and monasteries

There are several functioning churches through out Iraq. In Baghdad there is a big Cathedral and six other churches, in Mosul, six Churches, In QaraQosh three, in each of Bartella and Bahshiqa two, and in each of Sinjar, Kirkuk, Bahizzani and Mergi one church.

Syrian O. Nuns in prayer

Der Mar Matta is one of the oldest and most famous monasteries of Mesopotamia, that used to house over a thousand monks has three monks living in it at the present time. It has been recently rebuilt and modernised to provide the faithful with a sanctuary for quiet prayer and meditation or even as a place of picnic or long break from the turmoil of life. There is also Der Mar Daniel in Bartella and *Der Youhanna al-Delaimi* in Qaraqosh which are being reconstructed.

There is one order for nuns 'The nuns of *Ya'qub al-Barad'i*. Two of these nuns presently reside in a convent in Baghdad and twenty five Iraqi nuns in Syria.

Mar IgnatiusZakka I Iwas

Educational and cultural activities

The seminary of Mar Ephrem was established in Mosul in 1945. Individuals study in preparation for the priesthood for four years. There is close cooperation with other Christian denominations who often cooperate in giving lectures and seminars in their subjects of interest.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has several schools in Mosul, Sinjar and Baghdad, where in addition to the curriculum, religious instructions used to be provided. When schools were taken over by the State in 1972, alternatives were found and religious instructions were offered for the faithful in many parishes. The Mosul parish publishes a magazine called '*Sada al-Mahabba'* or 'Echoes of love'.

Ecumenical dialogue

The Syrian Orthodox Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and the Middle Eastern Council of Churches and has been at the forefront of the ecumenical movement.

The first dialogue in which the Syrian Orthodox Church was involved is that with the Eastern Orthodox Churches. It began unofficially in 1964 and both agreed on the essence of the Christological dogma that Christ is perfect God and perfect man and that the different terminologies used by each side express the same truth

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Churches started unofficially at Pro Oriente Foundation in 1971, which led to the formulation of the famous 'Vienna Christological Formula', that became the basis for official dialogue. This was followed by the joint declaration between the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church Mar Ignatius Ya'qub III and his holiness Pope Paul VI on the 27th Oct 1971, which was the first of its kind. His Holiness Pope John II consolidated this agreement with Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas in 1984 and drew on it for the development of dialogue with his Holiness Pope Shenuda.
During these meeting theological discussions revealed that the separation of the churches was due to terminological misunderstanding and agreed that they all unite in professing that Christ is fully God and fully human in one person without confusion, Change, separation or division. The steps that followed was to remove anathemas from their vocabulary and avoid invective and polemical language when referring to each other differences.
The fruitful result of these dialogues has been foreseen by the great leader of the Syrian Orthodox Church who wrote in the thirteenth century:

> 'When I had given much thought and pondered on the matter, I became convinced that these quarrels among the different Christian Churches are not a matter of factual substance, but of word and terminology; for they all confess Christ our Lord to be perfect God and perfect human, without any commingling, mixing, or confusion of natures…thus I saw the Christian Communities, with their different Christological positions, as possessing a single common ground that is without any difference between them'.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has also conducted fruitful dialogue with the Anglican Church, with various reformation Churches, though these have been on practical rather than on theological issues. Dialogue with other churches of the Syriac tradition, namely the Chaldean Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, the Maronite Church and the Church of the East, has also been on the way, facilitated by *Pro O*riente. Given the spirit of ecumenism, the Syrian Orthodox Church has been active in the Council of Christians of Iraq.

SAINTS FROM MESOPOTAMIA

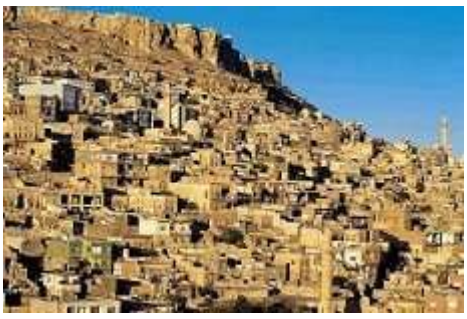
St Mari

By: Wisam Talal

Saint Mari was a disciple of St Addai (one of the seventy two apostles), who ordained him and set him to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom. He was sent to evangelise the land of Babylon, Ahoaz, Tigris river surroundings, Faris, Kashkir and the people of Rathaneen. He was known for his great love of God and his virtuous ways.

He was presented with cottages as a gift for his healing the daughter of Mardinshah ruler of Kasteefon. He accepted this gift and used to establish a church which was thus named Kokhy.

Saint Mari was a very humble soul. He was gentle towards others, and anger had no place in him. In the most holy name of Jesus, he did great miracles and many conversions took place.



Mardin today

He sent his disciple Tomees to the land of Dassan and Zozan (now part of Imadia in Iraq) as a response to the Lord's request when He appeared to him one night.

At the command of St Mari, his other disciple Eda exorcised seventy two demons out of idols at Jermaay.
Saint Mari also evangelised Nisibis (*Nusaybin*), Arzoon, Hudeaab and others. He established churches in Iran and named after the apostles Peter, Paul and *Addai*.
After a long evangelising journey he came back to the convent of *Qunni* where he died and buried.

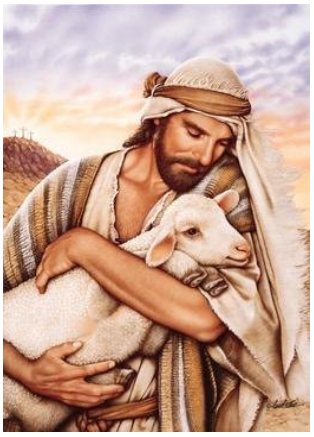
created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

"He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good"

Saint Isaac the Syrian commentary (7th Century), monk at Nineveh. Discourse, 2nd series, 38, 5 and 39, 3

There is no changing of intentions in the Creator, neither before nor after: there is neither hate nor resentment in his nature, nor is there a bigger or a smaller place in his love, nor a before or an after in his knowledge. For if we all believe that creation began to exist as a consequence of the goodness and love of the Creator, we know that this first motive will not die down nor will it change in the Creator, following the disorderly course of his creation.

It would be quite obnoxious and really blasphemous to believe that hate and resentment exist in God – even towards the demons – or to imagine other weaknesses or passions in Him. On the contrary, God acts towards us always in ways he knows being profitable for us, that these may be for us cause of suffering or of consolation, of joy or of sorrow, that they may be insignificant or glorious – all are oriented towards the same everlasting goods.
(www.USCCB.com)



The Sunday Services at the Oriental Churches in London:

- **(Chaldean Catholic Mission) at The Holy family Catholic Church, Vale Lane, West Acton, London W3 0DY (12.30 pm) (Tel: 02089976370)**
- **(Syriac Catholic Mission) at The Holy Trinity Church, 41 Brook Green, Hammersmith, London W6 7BL (1pm)(Mob: 07876424662)**
- **(Syriac Orthodox Church) at St Andrews Church, Star Road, London W14 (4pm)(Tel: 02086547531)**
- **(Assyrian Church) at St. Mary Parish, Westminster Road, Hanwell, London W7 3TU (9am) (020815671814)**
- **(Ancient Church of the East) at St Mary Church Hall, 62 Greenford Avenue, Hanwell, London, W7 4NQ (9 am) 02085676463**

ZIGGURATS

The Sumerian Ziggurate in Ur, south of Iraq

Each ancient Iraqi town or city - especially south of Baghdad- wanted to be protected by its own god, who was worshiped in a temple built in the center of the city, this tradition begun around 2100 B.C. The temple was called Ziggurats. It was large and high in an attempt for the people to reach their gods which were thought to dwell in the sky

Most of ziggurats were built of mud bricks.

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Religious events at that time were held at the temple - as a place for worshiping. But later, with the developing of priesthood, the temple became the center of both religious and social celebrations for the community in the same city.

St. Bihnam's Monastery (4th century)

This Monastery is located in 20 miles south-East of Mosul. 4 miles from the Ancient Assyrian city of (Nimrud), situated near the Tigris River. The Monastery is surrounded with walls having doors embroidered with ancient Assyrian designs. Beside the monastery, is the famous man-made cave (*Jib*), with the tomb of Saint *Bihnam*. The historical church is dated to the early 12th century.

Sculptures in the church show that renovations were done in 1164, 1250-1261 AD. Records show that the monastery suffered greatly during the period from 1743 - 1790 due to the *Nadr Shah* attacks on the Christians in the region. For some unknown reason, the monks abandoned the monastery in 1819. The monastery changed hands to the Syriac Catholic Church in 1839, and

FROM THE ARCHIEVE

Anesa Gorgees Badrany, an Iraqi Christian midwife from Baqofa/Mosul. Was born in Baghdad in 1900. She worked as midwife for 45 years. The photo was taken in Mosul in 1945. She died in 1996

From: Dr Nadhim Hermiz / Norwich

Remember Iraq in your Prayers

[i] Stephanie Dalley, "The Influence of Mesopotamia upon Israel and the Bible" in "The Legacy of Mesopotamia"
[ii] Ibid
[iii] Fernand Braudel – p 87
[iv] Ibid

Mesopotamia: Eastern Iraqi Christians Newspaper, Editor: Fr. Habib JAJOU
Email: Fr_habib@yahoo.com Tel: 02089976370 www.chaldean.org.uk
Publisher: Chaldean Catholic Mission, 38Cavendish Ave. Ealing, London W13 0JQ.
In order to cover production costs we recommend a supporting subscription.
Opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors, not necessarily of the Church as such

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image